

A N A D D R E S S

By
CHARLES KERR



Delivered at

HARRODSBURG, KENTUCKY, JUNE 16, 1924

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE SETTLEMENT
of KENTUCKY

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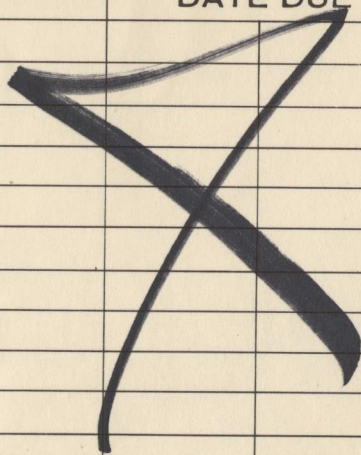
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*An address delivered at Harrodsburg, Kentucky,
June 16, 1924, on the occasion of the 150th
Anniversary of the Settlement of Kentucky*

BY

CHARLES KERR

"Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy."

Standing amid these historic scenes, consecrated with the blood and hallowed with the dust of those who stood at Statehood's early dawn, so may we, with symbolic reverence, put our shoes from off our feet, for the place whereon we stand is holy to every son and daughter of Kentucky.

In that great movement of the middle eighteenth century, that had for its objective the winning of the West, there is no spot we may hold in more reverent keeping than Harrod Hill. Here, in a vast, unbroken wilderness, far projected beyond the last outpost of civilization, was laid the foundation of a new social and political order, that had for its sole protection the cohesive force of mutual self-support.

Seven score and 10 years ago this day, where Nature primeval had run riot for centuries untold, the first roof tree was planted by the members of that order in token of a predetermined intention of searching out an untitled land and holding it. No imagination can conceive, no words portray, the settings of that primordial day when James Harrod and his intrepid companions encamped upon this beautiful spot, where Dame Nature, clad in her most gorgeous apparel, reigned supreme amid a revel of silence no human presence had ever disturbed, save as it may have been by her own nomadic children.

With the great divide between them and any possible human succor, the vanguard of this new civilization began the conquest of a land no race or tribe then held in sovereign right. To make comparison between that brave and isolated group of daring spirits, amid

such an environment, and the great concourse assembled here today, would be an imaginative venture few would dare attempt. But as the beneficiaries of the perils which they encountered, the vicissitudes through which they passed, the hardships which they endured, we may honor their memory and pay tribute to their worth, in the reflection that from Anglo-Saxon loins there never sprang a more virile race of home builders and state builders than those who laid the foundation of our native State. It was a race which, out of the trials by battle with savage and the resisting forces of Nature, incident to the establishment of a permanent lodgment in an unbroken wild, developed a self-reliance no venture could impair, a courage no hazard could daunt, an independence no restraint could subdue. In the stockade they learned the true spirit of democracy. Bound together by imperiled associations, they were equals all. Gentle of manner and tender of heart, it was yet a race that knew no fear. To have descended from such a stock is a heritage few may acclaim.

Nowhere else in all America has there been produced just such a racial amalgamation as the early Kentuckian. From the banks of the Yadkin, the Valley of the James, the slopes of the Monongahela, over the Alleghenies, through the passes of the Blue Ridge—Scots, Irish, Huguenots, Covenanters, Roundheads, Cavaliers, they came, an ever increasing swarm of land-covetous spies. Out of these irreconcilable religious faiths, social cleavages and political tenets emerged the composite Kentuckian, a demonstrated product of the fact that "There is neither East nor West, border nor breed nor birth."

This brilliant assemblage of the sons and daughters of such a stock invites, and the occasion demands, an appreciative word for those who conceived and have carried to success this magnificent demonstration in honor of the memory of those who dared to win—and won. Their magnificent effort has taught us that in commemorating the deeds and preserving the landmarks of the fathers, we make tribute to as noble a race of hardy adventurers as recorded history reveals. Did we quest the heroic virtues of those who sought for self a home, and in seeking found a land wherein they and their posterity might dwell, we would find that nowhere had those virtues been more perfectly retained than here where first they were planted.

In this olden shire, amid memories cherished by every Kentuckian, time has not withered nor custom staled those early-implemented virtues, upon the perpetuation of which depend our destiny as a nation and our happiness as a people. With you who named your county in honor of that gallant Scot who fell fighting for his country, the

old spirit of "Achilles absent is Achilles still" has endured through all the intervening years.

It is the instruction of history that man has achieved his greatest triumphs on the frontier of human progress. The pioneer in every movement that has left its impress on human thought and action has stood in the vanguard of civilization. The men and women who brought their household gods to Kentucky were pioneers in all the term implies. Inspired they may have been by the love of adventure, lured no doubt by the hope of gain, there was yet present an inborn love of home and country that was deep-seated and enduring, and as the forest melted before them, and the ground yielded its increase, social and political order became a controlling passion. The blandishments of a foreign alliance were impotent in detaching them from race, and kindred, and tongue that dwelt behind the mountains whence they came. Out of a series of conventions, held within the boundaries of what was once Mercer county, the first born of Lincoln, grew the sentiment of a non-entangling foreign alliance that has become so deeply rooted in the Nation's policies. Though few in number were those who found asylum in the rude fortress that once here stood, there was present the blood of those who had fought at Bannockburn, and Londonderry, and Flodden Field, and among their own descendants may be numbered governors, college presidents, justices of the Supreme Court, scientists of international fame, lawyers, scholars, soldiers, statesmen and one candidate for President, who received enough votes to cause the defeat of Henry Clay. Always active in the advancement of every interest of the State, sanely progressive, her people have ever maintained an unfaltering faith in the principles that dominated an ancestry of which they are justly proud. Always the geographic center, Mercer is today the admired center of the whole State.

The significance of this occasion would be irreparably impaired if appropriate reference were not made to the name and achievements of one of the Nation's greatest characters. Any failure to make mention of the achievements of George Rogers Clark in reviewing the struggles of the early Kentucky pioneers would be grave and inexcusable omission. Born in Albemarle county, Virginia, in the year 1752, he had scarce turned 22 when he first visited the Kentucky settlements, which included Harrodstown. So impressed was he with the beauty and magnificence of the country, he returned to Virginia in the fall of 1775, determined to return hither and make it his future home. The following spring found him back in Kentucky. Brave, bold, energetic, and, withal, prepossessing in manner,

he was abundantly possessed of all the graces calculated to win favor among a frontier people.

Enticed hither, in the first instance, by a Saxon's desire "to have and hold," the welfare of the sparse and unprotected settlements, exposed to the hazards of such a life, caused him to abandon his personal interests, and to devote his energies to the better security of the settlers, many of whom had been his neighbors and friends back in Virginia. An organized government, in some form, early engaged his attention. Among the first to reject the claims of the Transylvania Company, an adjustment of the title dispute between that company and Virginia became a matter of grave concern. Whether he and his fellow-pioneers were Virginians or Transylvanians was a matter of no small moment. If this could not be amicably effected an independent government was their only recourse. At the suggestion of Clark, a mere lad in years, the first election held in Kentucky was held at Fort Harrod, called for the purpose of selecting delegates to the mother country. Himself and Gabriel Jones were selected, not as delegates, but as members of the Virginia Legislature. The result of their journey to Williamsburg is a well known matter of history.

The recognition of Kentucky as a county of Virginia, against the combined efforts of Colonel Campbell and Colonel Henderson in opposition, was a signal triumph. Kentucky county, with the same name and boundaries it now possesses, was the beginning of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

The major portion of the winter of 1777 was spent by Clark in the fort at this place. That the Illinois campaign was uppermost in his mind at that time is clearly established by subsequent events. Silent, non-communicative, disinclined to seek or give advice, or to impart his plans or purposes to his most intimate associates, it is certain his entire campaign was carefully planned in his own mind, on the very spot where we now stand, before his return to Virginia. That he even advised with those who were to be his most trusted lieutenants, is supported by no written memorial. Even the spies which he sent out in advance had not the slightest conception of the purpose for which they had been sent. He himself is authority for the statement that no one in Kentucky knew his design "until it was ripe for execution." Equally secretive was he on his return to Virginia. Governor Henry, Thomas Jefferson, George Wythe and George Mason, his friends, alone were taken into his confidence. The Legislature which voted supplies was not even informed of the

real purpose of its act. So carefully did he guard his secret that the instructions given by Governor Henry were in two sets, one for the public and one for the private use of Clark.

The conquest of the Illinois country forms one of the most thrilling episodes in American history. No event of such far-reaching consequences was then or has since been so little appreciated. Upon no national hero has there been bestowed so scant recognition. After having added to the national domain what is today its richest possession he died near the scene of his triumphs unpossessed of the wealth he had so richly bestowed upon others. Remiss as a Nation, equally remiss as a State, in a just appraisal of his great services to both, there is yet much we can do to correct an indifference so gross it almost savors of ingratitude. At 24 he had given to his adopted State an independent self-government—at 26 had given to his native State and to the Nation an empire more opulent than that for the independence of which the Colonies were contending. No such distinction has ever been attained by any other American. A Napoleon in action, a Washington in repose, his services to the Nation merit unstinted praise and recognition. What may have been the fate of the American Nation had English or French domination prevailed over the northwest territory would be an idle speculation. What George Rogers Clark did, however, has placed his name in that Hall of Fame from which obscurity has been forever barred.

Fellow Kentuckians, it is an inspiring occasion that has brought us together. The part Kentucky and Kentuckians have taken in the Nation's advancement may be mentioned with pardonable self-elation. With the achievements of Clark full in mind, it was another Kentuckian that advised a national executive, halting "twixt doubt and fear," that the purchase of the Louisiana Territory violated no constitutional inhibitions, thus adding another domain, greater than all, to our national boundaries. It was a Kentuckian that secured the Puget Sound country from English domination and Spanish usurpation. Without the aid of Kentucky it may well be doubted if the Mexican boundary line could have been fixed at the Rio Grande. The first of Anglo-Saxon breed to humanize our penal statutes was a Kentuckian. Only of a Kentuckian has it been said that if the English system of jurisprudence were destroyed in an overnight, he could reproduce it from his own mental storehouse. It was a Kentuckian that first conceived a national banking system. And in the hour of national distress it was Kentucky that gave a President to each of the contending sections. And as we stand here today in the presence of the humble cabin in which one of those Presidents was

born, and contrast that poverty-environed abode with that magnificent monument that adorns the Nation's Capital, and then, too, recall the magnificent monument erected to that other President by an admiring, if defeated, host, we cannot suppress the conviction that had they remained Kentuckians, there had been no incarnadined struggle, no embittered sectionalism.

Holding in prideful retrospect the achievements of a century and a half, it were well we make of this the occasion of serious introspection. The world moves in eras. Each century develops its own peculiar tendencies. That in which our fathers and mothers lived was liberty—liberty of thought, liberty of speech, liberty of action. Not in human progression has there been developed such a combination of mind and character as that which dominated the nation-building period in America. It was an era that bred men and women, through whose veins the sap of liberty never ceased to flow, and who, knowing their rights dared maintain them.

As was said by another, "The past, at least, is secure." In reviewing the famous men of his nation, then fast passing into decadence, no more eloquent words were ever uttered than those of Jesus-ben-Sirach:

"Their seed shall remain forever,
And their glory shall not be blotted out.
Their bodies are buried in peace,
But their name liveth forevermore."

So may we today, with equal ardor, say of those who "were honored in their generation, and were the glory of their time." The lichen and the moss may obscure the name engraved upon the simplest tablet that marks their last resting place; the ivy and the vine may riot over their unkempt grave, but their seed shall remain forever in the land, nor shall the glory of their name be blotted out.

Standing today in the presence of this inspiring throng, with the glorious memories of other days crowding upon us, let us turn with confidence to the future, sincere in the trust, firm in the faith, there yet remains enough of the leaven to releaven the lump—if only we keep faith with those who were present at the birth of the infant State, many of whom now sleep in yonder hallowed spot. It may be we are passing through an era of constitutional demolition and political ineptitude; State identity may have become a mere passing illusion; Congress may have redelegated the powers exclusively delegated to it to every conceivable kind of board, bureau or commission; the whole Nation may for the moment be permeated with an

illusive and delusive form of progression that leads to inevitable retrogression; rights once held to be inalienable may for a time be submerged in a sea of fanatical intolerance; a Constitution once symmetrical in all its parts may be battered and bruised beyond recognition in the continued assaults that are being made upon it through ill-timed and misdirected amendments; it may be the foes of self-government are as great a menace as was the lurking savage to the settler, but once the safety of the Nation may be threatened through any of these insidious forces, that Kentucky which in other years has answered every call to duty, that Kentucky the blood of whose sons has stained every field of battle fought in defense of the Nation, will not permit the Ark of the Covenant to be immolated by the priests of Baal.

Standing today upon the spot where the infant State was born, let us here and now rededicate our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor to the maintenance of those principles for which our fathers pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. Let us here highly resolve that as in times past so shall Kentucky again be potent in the councils of the Nation. The fountain from which our grand sires drank has not ceased to flow; the vines which they planted have not ceased to yield. Though it be an era of almost vanishing statesmanship and political decadence, the trunk of the implanted old tree still stands, and the sap still runs. Let us, therefore, never forget that we are an integral part of an indestructible whole; that we speak a common language, and in that language the Declaration of Independence was written; that we owe allegiance to but one flag, and that flag was born with the Republic; that we acknowledge but one sovereign, and that sovereign is the United States of America. Neither let us forget that we are Kentuckians, and as such let us never cease to honor her name or cherish her traditions. Not more do the sons of Albion love her hawthorn rows and sylvan dales; not more the sons of Scotia her mountain crags and heathered slopes; not more the sons of France her vine-clad hills and flowering fields, than we do we love

“Thy rocks and rills,
Thy templed woods and hills,”

Oh, Kentucky! Kentucky! It was from thy loins we sprang; it was at thy breast we were nourished, and it is beneath thy turf we would sleep the last long sleep.

